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Neither Proximity nor Directionality: A Subjective Approach to Issue Voting

Riccardo Pelizzo

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Introduction

Spatial theories of voting have provided one of the leading frameworks for the analysis of electoral competition and electoral behavior. Spatial theories assume that : (1) voters and parties have policy preferences, (2) these preferences can be represented by points in the policy space and (3) voters' electoral choice is affected by the disposition of their own preferences and of those of political parties. For almost four decades proximity theory has been the most popular spatial theory of voting¹. Proximity theory suggested that voters value parties on the basis of how proximate they are to their own personal position. This point had an obvious implication. If voters value proximity, then parties competing in two party systems should converge toward the position of the median voter to maximize their chances to win an election. Ironically even some of the scholars who were otherwise critical of proximity theory accepted the notion of convergence and little attention was paid to the fact that in two-party systems parties were actually not converging². The validity of proximity theory was questioned by what became known

¹ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1957.

² Giovanni Sartori is an obvious case in point in this respect. While Sartori devoted some attention to criticize and revise the Downsian theory, he assumed centripetal convergence as one of the peculiar features of two-party systems. See Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p 191 and pp. 324 and ff. See also Giovanni Sartori, "Modelli Spaziali di Competizione Tra Partiti" in Giovanni Sartori, *Teoria dei Partiti e Caso Italiano*, Milano, SugarCO, 1982, pp. 45-62. An explanation for why parties do not converge in two-party systems can be found in Stuart Elaine Macdonald and George Rabinowitz, "Solving the paradox of

as the directional theory of voting. This theory suggests that voters prefer parties and candidates which are on their side of a given policy dimension³.

The directional theory of voting has generated a large and growing body of research. Studies conducted in the directional theory framework have tested the empirical validity of the model, have tried to incorporate uncertainty into the model itself, have explained how directionality theory and proximity theory can be combined, and, above all, have attempted to show why directional theory is superior to proximity theory⁴. These claims have encountered some resistance among proximity theorists. Proximity theory scholars have argued that the success of directional theory is rather illusory. They so argue on three grounds: (1) that directional theory is less falsifiable than proximity theory; (2) that the empirical evidence provided in support of directionality theory is inadequate to sustain its claims; and (3) that when proper empirical analyses are performed, there is little evidence supporting the directional theory of issue voting⁵.

nonconvergence: valence, position, and direction in democratic politics”, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 17, n. 3, (September) 1998, pp. 281-300.

³ George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine MacDonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 83, n. 1, 1989, pp. 93-121.

⁴ Empirical analyses performed to test the empirical validity of directional theory can be found in George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *cit.*, pp. 93-121; Stuart Elaine Macdonald, George Rabinowitz and Ola Listhaug, “On Attempting to Rehabilitate Proximity Theory: Sometimes the Patient Just Can’t be Helped”, *Journal of Politics*, vol. 60, n. 3, (August) 1998, pp. 653-690. An attempt to incorporate uncertainty in the directional model was made by Stuart Elaine Macdonald and George Rabinowitz, “Direction and Uncertainty in a Model of Issue Voting”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 5, n. 1, 1993, pp. 61-87. How directionality and proximity models can be combined is discussed by Irwin L. Morris and George Rabinowitz, “On the Coexistence of Directional and Proximity Voters”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 9, n. 1, (January) 1997, pp. 75-88.

⁵ Anders Westholm, “Distance versus Direction: The Illusory Defeat of the Proximity Theory of the Electoral Choice”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 91, n. 4, (December) 1997, pp. 865-897. See also Anders Westholm, “On the Return of Epicycles: Some Crossroads in Spatial Modeling Revisited”, *Journal of Politics*, vol. 63, n. 2, (May) 2001, pp. 436-481. Lewis and King argued instead that the

This paper joins the proximity vs. directionality debate to argue that the real issue is not whether directionality theory is better than proximity theory. The paper argues that neither proximity theory nor directionality theory provide an adequate framework for spatial analyses. By postulating an individual relation between the voter and the party proximity theory and directional theory postulate that voters evaluate parties' stances relative to their own personal position. But by doing so proximity theory and directional theory are both unable to account for the inherently social character of the vote choice.

The paper then introduces a new, subjective approach to the study of issue voting. In contrast to both proximity theory and directional theory, the subjective approach provides a framework for spatial analysis that accounts for the social character of the vote choice. The subjective approach claims that voters do not evaluate parties' positions relative to their own. Rather voters judge the position of the party system relative to position of the whole electorate.

The paper is divided into four parts. Section One begins by arguing that both proximity and directionality theory are unable to understand how voters relate to and evaluate political parties because they reduce political relationships to economic ones. Section One then introduces the subjective approach which, in contrast to both proximity theory and directionality theory, explicitly considers the social character of

evidence provided by both proximity theorists and directionality theorists is inadequate to prove that one theory is superior to the other because the assumptions made by these theories cannot be tested on the basis of existing methods and data. See Jeffrey B. Lewis and Gary King, "No Evidence on Directional vs. Proximity Voting", *Political Analysis*, vol. 8, n. 1, pp. 21-33.

the vote choice. Section Two discusses what empirical analyses can be performed to test which of these spatial analytic theories has the greatest explanatory power. This Section argues that the explanatory power of proximity theory can be tested by measuring the percentage of voters who report not seeing any inter-party difference and who perceive parties to be equidistant from where they locate themselves on the left-right continuum⁶. The explanatory power of directionality theory can be tested by calculating the percentage of the voters who report not seeing inter-party differences placing parties on the same position on the left-right continuum. In order to compare the explanatory power of proximity theory, of directionality theory, and of the subjective approach presented in the paper we shall run then a logistic regression model. Section Three then points out the weaknesses of both proximity and directional theory. Section Three finds that the coefficients estimated by the logistic regression analysis are consistent with the claim that our subjective approach provides a better explanation than either proximity theory and directional theory for why voters do not see inter-party differences. Section Four discusses some implications of these findings.

⁶ The reason why I chose to use the left-right dimension instead of using, more specific issue dimension, is that a position on the left-right dimension indicates all a voter or a party stands for. It has been noted that “knowing where a party stands means knowing what it stands for”, see Riccardo Pelizzo, *Cartel Parties and Cartel Party Systems*, Unpublished Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2003, ch. 4. A similar point can be found in Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e Sinistra. Ragioni e Significati di una Distinzione Politica*, Roma, Donzelli, 1994 and more recently in John Huber and Ronald Inglehart, “Expert Interpretations of Party Space and party Locations in 42 Societies”, *Party Politics*, vol. 1, n. 1, 1995, pp. 111-ff. The importance of the left-right placement is such that it can be considered a sort of super issue, see Russell Dalton, *Citizens Politics. Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Democracies*, Chatam, Chatam House Publisher, 1996; see also Stefano Bartolini, “Collusion, Competition and Democracy, Part I”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 11, n. 4, pp. 435-470 and especially p. 452.

Section One: Proximity, Directionality and the Subjective Approach

Both proximity models and directionality models of electoral choice can be used to explain two very simple phenomena that is why a voter prefers one party over another one and why a voter is left indifferent by two different parties.

For proximity theory voters are utility maximizers that is their preferences as well as parties preferences can be represented in a policy space or dimension, and voters prefer the party which is closest to their own position on that dimension.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows a situation in which a voter (V) can choose between two parties (A, B). Here the distance between A and V is only 2 units, while the distance between V and B is 5 units. According to proximity theory the voter will cast her ballot for A because it is the party closest to her own position.

Proximity theory also holds that a voter may be left indifferent by two parties if, as shown in Figure 2, they are both at the same distance from the voter herself. If the utility attached to a party by a given voter is function of distance between the position of the party and the position of the voter, and if two parties are equidistant from the voter, then the voter does not have a utility-based reason to prefer one party over the other.

[Figure 2 about here]

Directional theorists have argued that the proximity model is vitiated by several problems. The most important of these problems, directional theorists claim, is that “the vast majority of voters (does) not see issues in the sharp positional fashion that the traditional theory assumes”⁷. On the contrary, directional theorists argue, “issues are perceived rather diffusely”⁸. Voters see political issues in a diffuse way instead of “the sharp positional fashion that the traditional theory assumes”⁹. In order for issues to have a political impact, directional theorists claim, they must be able to evoke emotions in the voters. Hence, directional theorists argue, in order to understand the impact of a political issue we need to know whether a voter feels favorable or not toward that issue (that is we need to know the voter’s direction) and we also need to know the magnitude of her feeling toward the issue (that is we need to know the intensity of the voter’s feelings about an issue). Thus for directional theorists voters’ assessment of a given party does not reflect how close that party is to the voter’s position. Instead voter’s assessment of a given party reflects (1) whether the voter and the party are on the same side of a given issue (direction) and (2) how important that issue is for both the voter and the party (intensity). The combination of direction and intensity generates what

⁷ George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *cit.*, vol. 83, n. 1, 1989, pp. 93-121. The quote is taken from p. 94.

⁸ Ivi, p. 94. The first criticism of proximity theory was formulated by Donald E. Stokes, “Spatial Models of Party Competition”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 57, n. 2, (June) 1963, pp. 368-377.

⁹ George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *cit.*, vol. 83, n. 1, 1989, p. 94.

directional theorists call the “directional effect”. This effect is estimated by the following formula¹⁰:

(party position – neutral point) x (voter position – neutral point).

[Figure 3 about here]

As it will soon be clear, proximity models and directional models of electoral choice generate quite different results. Let us look at Figure 3. According to proximity theory the voter V would prefer party B over party A because the distance between V and B is only two units while the distance between A and V is of three units. The opposite is true for directional theory. According to directional theory the voter V will prefer A over B because A and V are on the same side of the issue and because the issue is fairly important for party A. If we enter into the formula the data presented in Figure 3, we find that the directional effect of A is relatively strong and positive (+4), while the directional effect of B is fairly weak and negative (-1). Even more interesting is what directional theory has to say about Figure 2. In spite of the fact that both parties are on the voter’s side of the issue, voter V will prefer party A over party B because the issue is more important to A and, therefore, A’s directional effect is greater. If we enter in the formula the data presented in Figure 2, we find that the directional effect of A is 12 while that of B is 6.

¹⁰ George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *cit.*, p. 97.

Directional theory also explains why two parties may leave a voter indifferent. This occurs when both parties take the same position on a given issue regardless of where the voter stands.

[Figure 4 about here]

By taking the same position on an issue, the directional effect of both parties is identical and the voter has no way to decide between the two parties.

We are now in a position to see why these theories are unsatisfactory. Both theories assume that voters evaluate parties' stances relative to their own personal position. But this assumption is however inconsistent with the findings of empirical economic voting studies. Recent economic voting studies have shown that when a voter evaluates the economic performance of the incumbent, she does not evaluate that performance on the basis of her own economic conditions. Instead the voter evaluates the incumbent's performance on the basis of the general economic conditions of the whole country. In the words of Lewis-Beck "the strong (economic) motivation is collective or "sociotropic" (...) rather than personal or "pocketbook"¹¹. For example, assuming that unemployment is an important policy issue, the voter rewards/punishes the incumbent on the basis of the unemployment rate in the country rather than on the basis of whether she is unemployed or not. As Lewis-Beck noted, voters consider themselves responsible for their own economic conditions, while they consider the

¹¹ This quote as well as a discussion of the literature can be found in Michael Lewis-Beck, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1990, 1st paperback edition, p. 37 and passim.

government responsible for the economic conditions of the country. If voters evaluate parties' positions on policy issues in the same way in which they assess incumbents' economic performance, that is socially rather than individually, then they judge parties' positions relative to the position of the whole electorate rather than evaluating parties' positions relative to their own position. In other words, a key assumption made by both proximity theory and directionality theory is false.

This analysis is consistent not only with the findings of economic voting studies, but also with most of the traditional party studies¹². According to these studies parties are organizations that perform several functions—they bridge the gap between society and the state, they integrate previously un-represented or under-represented groups into the political system, they select political personnel, they run (candidates) for office and, in case they win the elections, they govern¹³. One of the most important functions that parties are expected to perform is to listen to voters' demands, and to aggregate them into coherent electoral platforms on which they campaign at election time¹⁴. Therefore, if a voter knows that parties are instruments of social aggregation, then she will not evaluate a party on the basis of its ability to address her own demands –as represented by her position in the political space – but will instead evaluate a party on the basis of its ability to address society's demands –as represented by the electorate's position in the political space.

¹² A discussion of the literature can be found in Peter Mair, "Introduction", in Peter Mair (ed.), *The West European Party System*, Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1990, p.1 and ff.

¹³ Ivi, p. 1.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968, p. 20.

However, parties are not atoms that exist in a vacuum. They exist in their relation to other parties, to the electorate and to other parties' relations to the electorate. The fact that a party's existence is embedded in this web of relations has some consequences for how parties position themselves on various policy dimensions. The position that a party takes on a policy dimension is influenced by the positions that the electorate and other parties take on that issue. The fact that parties' existence is embedded in this web of relations allows one to reformulate Sartori's proposition that "each party is a function (in the mathematical sense) of the other parties and reacts, competitively or otherwise, to the other parties"¹⁵. In competitive party systems, each party is a function of the other parties and reacts, competitively or otherwise, to the presence and the position of other parties. Therefore in judging whether parties are in fact different from each other, whether they provide clear alternatives or not, and whether they satisfy the electorate's demands or not, a voter evaluates the position of the whole party system relative to the electorate's position¹⁶.

In light of this argument, I suggest that parties leave a voter indifferent when there is a gap between the perceived position of the party system and that of the electorate. I also suggest that voters become increasingly indifferent to parties as the distance between the electorate's position and the perceived position of the party system increases.

¹⁵ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 44.

¹⁶ Riccardo Pelizzo, *Cartel Parties and Cartel Party Systems*, Unpublished Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2003.

Section Two: Testing the Cases

Surveys conducted in several Western European countries in the past two decades have asked respondents whether they think that parties are too similar to provide clear political alternatives, and whether they think that parties have different policy objectives. Answers to these survey questions provide exactly the kind of evidence that we need to test whether voters' behavior is best explained by proximity theory, by directionality theory, or by the subjective approach. When a voter says that two parties do not provide clear alternatives, she is effectively saying that two parties are indistinguishable. The fact that parties are perceived as being indistinguishable has important implications for spatial theories of voting. It implies that for voters the utility attached to a political party, say the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) is as great as the utility attached to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In these circumstances, therefore, voters can no longer detect any party difference (in terms of utils). The major difference between proximity theorists and directional theorists is over why parties are perceived to be no longer making a difference. For proximity theorists, two parties have the same utility for a given voter if they are equi-distant from the voter's position. For directional theorists, two parties have the same amount of utility for a voter only when they are on the same side of an issue and have the same intensity on that issue –this combination of circumstances occurs only when parties occupy the same position.

Here a question arises: what generates voters' inability to see any difference between the SPD and the CDU? Proximity theory answers that the inability is generated

by the fact that parties are equidistant from the position of the voter. Directional theory answers that the inability is generated by the fact that parties occupy the same position on a given issue. The subjective theory presented above answers that the inability is due to the fact that the party system is moving away from the electorate.

Let us now treat these three theories' answers as competing hypotheses to be tested analyzing the data from the 1998 *Deutsche nationale Wahlstudien* (German National Election Study). Our statistical tests of these competing hypotheses are straightforward. We begin with proximity theory. For proximity theory a voter is indifferent between two (or more) parties only when these parties are equidistant from the voter herself. Once we have identified the voters who report that they do not see any difference between two or more parties, we try to see whether voters do not see inter-party differences because they perceive parties to be equidistant from their own position. To test whether this is the case, we measure the distance between one party and the voter, the distance between the voter and the second party, and then subtract one distance from the other. If the result of this subtraction is zero, then the findings of our analyses support the proximity theory's hypothesis. If the result of the subtraction is other than zero, then the findings of our analyses discredit the proximity theory's hypothesis.

To test the explanatory power of directional theory we test whether voters who report seeing no difference between parties do so because they perceive parties to

occupy the same position in the political space¹⁷. To test whether this is actually the case, we subtract a party positional score from that of the other party. If the result is zero, then our findings are consistent with directional theory. If the result is other than zero, then our findings discredit directional theory.

To test the explanatory power of our subjective approach, we measure the distance between the position of the electorate and the position of the party system. This variable is measured in the following way. Election surveys ask respondents to locate themselves on the left-right scale¹⁸. On the basis of voters' self-placement on the scale, we compute the average voter position. The average voter position is adopted as the indicator of the electorate's location on the left-right continuum. Election surveys also ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale. The scale is the same as the one adopted for respondents' self-placement on the left-right continuum. On the basis of voters' responses, we compute the position of each of the relevant parties in the party system. Parties are identified as relevant if they have either coalition potential or blackmail potential. According to Sartori a party has coalition potential "if it finds itself in a position to determine over time, or at some point in time, at least one of the possible governmental majorities"¹⁹, while a party has a blackmail potential when it can prevent a government coalition from being formed or when "it alters the *direction* of

¹⁷ This test is appropriate because it is only when two parties occupy the same position that they have the same direction, intensity, and, therefore, directional effect on the voter.

¹⁸ The German National Election Studies use an 11-point scale, where value '1' indicates left, value '11' indicates right and value '6' indicates center. The center value corresponds exactly to what the directional theorists call the neutral point.

¹⁹ See Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, op. cit., p. 122.

competition”²⁰. On the basis of two criteria, how many parties should be considered as relevant in Germany in the 1976-98 period? We must consider the SPD, the CDU, the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Liberal Party (FDP) as relevant because they were all, at one point or another, members of a government coalition. By contrast, in the period under examination, the Greens do not qualify for relevance. In fact, until 1998 the Greens were not needed to form a government coalition and hence did not have coalition potential. Second, the Greens did not have blackmail potential because their appearance did not alter the pattern of inter-party competition, which remained solidly bipolar, and the Greens were never needed to form a government coalition. Having established which are the relevant parties in Germany, the party system’s location on the left-right dimension for a given voter is estimated by adding the left-right scores given by that voter to the relevant parties and by dividing the result of the sum by the number of relevant parties. By computing the average of the party system’s location for all voters, we obtain our estimate of the party system position. The distance between the party system position and the position of the electorate is calculated by subtracting the electorate’s position from the position of the party system.

Having estimated this new variable, we may now perform a second statistical analysis to test whether voters’ inability to see any inter-party difference is best explained by proximity theory, by directional theory, or by the subjective approach. Our response variable is a dichotomous variable taking value 1 when a voter reports not seeing any inter-party difference and taking value 0 when she reports seeing differences.

²⁰ See Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, op. cit., p. 122-123.

This variable is labeled as NODIFF. By running a logistic regression, we can compare and contrast the explanatory power of proximity theory, of directional theory, and of the subjective approach. Now according to proximity theory, we should expect to find that an increase in the difference between the distance between the position of a party and a voter and the distance between the position of another party and the same voter (this variable is labeled as PROXI), should reduce the probability that a voter does not see any difference between the two parties. According to directional theory, we should find that an increase in the distance between the position of two parties (this variable is labeled as DIRE) leads to a decrease in the probability that a voter sees no difference between the parties. According to our subjective approach, an increase in the distance between the position of the electorate and the position of the party system (variable is labeled as GAP) should increase the probability that a voter does not see inter-party differences.

Section Three: Some Evidence

In 1998 41.6 percent of the German electorate detected no difference between German parties. The fact that such a large percentage of German voters did not detect inter-party differences is not explained very well by either by proximity theory or directional theory. In fact, only 5.4 percent of the cases was consistent with directionality theory and only 13.1 percent of the cases was consistent with proximity theory. These results are somewhat problematic for these two theories because spatial theories of political

competition, like all economic theories, “ask to be judged by the accuracy of their predictions and refuse to discuss the realism of their assumptions” and in this case their predictions are inaccurate²¹. Data are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

When we perform the logistic regression and evaluate the strength of the relationship between the independent variables on the basis of the unstandardized coefficients, we find that GAP has the strongest effect, followed by PROXI, while DIRE is not statistically significant²². Results of the Logistic Regression are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

What the logistic regression coefficients tell us is that each unit increase in GAP is associated with an increase of .155 in $\text{logit}(\text{NODIFF})$, that each unit increase in PROXI is associated with a decrease of .050 in $\text{logit}(\text{NODIFF})$, and that each unit increase in DIRE is associated with an increase of .004 in $\text{logit}(\text{NODIFF})$. The meaning of the first coefficient is that when the party system moves away from the position of the electorate, the probability that a voter sees no inter-party difference increases. The meaning of the second coefficient is that as parties move away from a position of equidistance from

²¹ The quote is taken from Stefano Bartolini, “Collusion, Competition and Democracy”, *cit.*, p. 437.

²² Since each of these three variables is estimated on the same 11-point left-right scale, there is no need to use standardized logistic regression coefficients to compare the strength of the relationship between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

the position of the voter, the probability that the voter sees no inter-party difference declines. In other words the logistic regression coefficients for both GAP and PROXI are consistent with what the subjective approach and proximity theory would lead one to expect. The logistic regression coefficients indicate that the probability that a voter sees no inter-party difference experiences a (minimal) increase as the distance between the parties increases. Yet we should note that the relationship between DIRE and NODIFF is not only very weak and with the wrong sign but is also statistically insignificant.

How changes in our independent variables influence the probability that a voter does not see any difference between various parties becomes apparent once we translate logits into the more easily understandable probabilities. The logistic regression coefficients presented in Table 2 can be written as an equation. The equation is $\text{logit}(\text{NODIFF}) = .155 (\text{GAP}) - .050 (\text{PROXI}) + .004 (\text{DIRE}) - .480$. Probabilities can be computed by replacing the variables in the equation with their values for actual cases. For example when a voter thinks that the position of the party system corresponds exactly to that of the electorate ($\text{GAP} = 0$), that the difference between the distance of the SPD and herself and the distance between the CDU and herself is large ($\text{PROXI} = 5$) and that the distance between SPD and CDU is also large ($\text{DIRE} = 5$), the equation takes the following values:

$$\text{logit}(\text{NODIFF}) = .155 (0) - .050 (5) + .004 (5) - .480 = -.710.$$

In this case the probability that the voters sees no inter-party difference is

$e^{-.71} / (1 + e^{-.71}) = .330$ or 33 percent. When a voters instead perceives that the position of the party system is distant from that of the electorate (GAP = 5.75), that parties are equidistant from the voter herself (PROXI = 0) and that the parties occupy the same position (DIRE = 0), the equation takes the following values:

$$\text{logit(NODIFF)} = .155 (5.75) - .050 (0) + .004 (0) - .480 = .411.$$

In this case the probability that a voter sees no inter-party difference is $e^{.411} / (1 + e^{.411}) = .601$ or 60 percent.

From a substantive point of view the meaning of these findings is clear. The findings show : (1) that the gap between the position of the electorate and the position of the party system affects the probability that a voter fails to see inter-party differences; (2) that the gap between the position of the electorate and the position of the party system has a stronger and statistically more significant influence on whether voters see no inter-party differences than the other variables included in the model; and, therefore, (3) that the subjective approach provides a better explanation than either proximity theory and directional theory for why voters do not see inter-party differences.

Section Four

The fact that the subjective approach provides a better explanation of voters' behavior than both proximity theory and directionality theory is very important not only

for party scholars but also for party politicians. For many years after the publication of Downs's work, proximity models have been the dominant framework for spatial analyses of electoral choice. On this model voters are rational utility-maximizers, they vote for the party that is expected to maximize their utility, where utility is considered as a function of the distance between the position of the voter and that of a party along a given dimension. Specifically, the utility a voter expects to receive from voting for a party increases as the distance between that voter and that party decreases. The proximity model of voting behavior has obvious consequences for parties' strategy. The model purports to show that in order to maximize their electoral returns, parties need to reduce the distance between their position and the position of the median voter and they do so by moving toward the center position.

Moving toward the center is exactly what the German SPD decided to do to revive its electoral competitiveness. The secretary of the SPD tried to improve the SPD's electoral fortunes by launching the idea of a *Neue Mitte*, that is of a New Center. From a substantive or policy-oriented point of view, the idea of a New Center was used to emphasize the SPD's commitment to economic and social policies which had little, if anything to do, with the tradition of the Left. But form is sometimes more important than substance and symbols are sometimes more important than policies. Hence, it is remarkable that a party of the Left defines its new position and, with it, its new political role in a 'center' (*Mitte*) however new.

The data presented in Table 3 show that German voters did indeed perceive the SPD's centripetal convergence. These data also show that the SPD's centripetal

convergence or rightward move is partially responsible for the right-ward shift of the German party system. In fact, while both the CDU and the CSU were perceived to be adjusting their position by moving toward the left, the SPD and the FDP were perceived to be shifting to the right. And since the rightward move of FDP and SPD was greater than the leftward move of the CDU and the CSU, the whole party system was perceived to be moving toward the right while the German electorate was slowly moving toward the left. The simultaneous leftward shift of the electorate and the rightward shift of the party system cause a widening gap between the electorate and the party system. In fact, the gap between the electorate and the party system grew from .40 in 1976 to more than 1.3 in 1998. Data are reported in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

In any event, the centripetal convergence and/or rightward move of the parties of the Left represents a rational and legitimate strategic move only as long as voters are really concerned with parties' positions. The results of the statistical analyses presented in this paper show that voters might *not* be so concerned. Voters' perception of the lack of political alternatives is related not to the position of individual parties but instead to the gap between the position of the electorate and that of the party system. If voters' perception of parties' utility (and voters' electoral choice) is constructed in the same way in which voters perceive political alternatives, that is by paying attention to the gap between the position of the electorate and that of the party system, then it is not obvious

that centripetal convergence represents the best possible strategy to maximize electoral returns. The subjective approach makes us wonder whether it is rational for the SPD to move centripetally or rightward (and to contribute to shifting the whole party system further to the right) exactly when the electorate is moving left-ward. It does not make much sense for a party of the Left to attempt to satisfy voters' demand for more Left by turning right.

Figure 1. Issue Dimension to Illustrate Utility Calculations Using Proximity Models

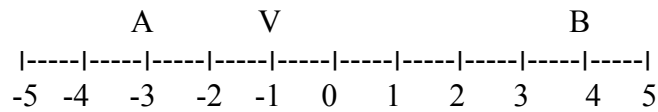


Figure 2. Issue Dimension to Illustrate Utility Calculations Using Proximity Models

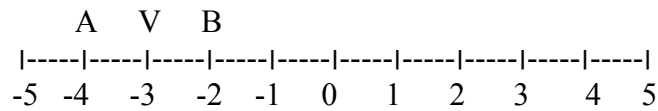


Figure 3. Issue Dimension to Illustrate Utility Calculations Using Directional Models

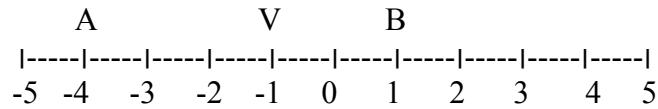


Figure 4. Issue Dimension to Illustrate Utility Calculations Using Directional Models

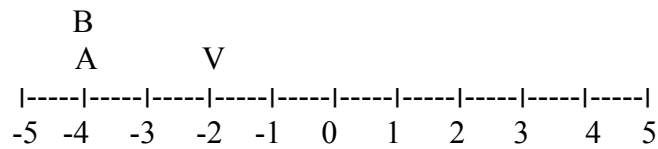


Table 1. The explanatory power of Proximity Theory and Directionality Theory

% of voters not seeing inter-party differences placing SPD and CDU on the left-right continuum			% of voters not seeing inter-party differences placing SPD and CDU at the same distance from their own position		
%	of	N	%	of	N
5.4		2978	13.1		2789

Source: Juergen Falter, Oscar W. Gabriel, and Hans Rattinger, *Politische Einstellungen, politische Participation und Waehlverhalten in Vereiningten Deutschland. Deutsche nationale Wahlstudie zur Bundestagswahl 1998*, Koeln, Zentralarchiv fuer Sozialforschung an der Universitaet zu Koeln [distributor], ZA 3066.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Analysis for Voters' inability to see inter-party differences

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Unstandardized Logistic Regression Coefficients (b)	Standard Error of b	Statistical Significance of b
NODIFF	GAP	.155	.045	.001
	PROXI	-.050	.029	.080
	DIRE	.004	.026	.885
	CONSTANT	-.480	.095	.000

Source: Juergen Falter, Oscar W. Gabriel, and Hans Rattinger, *Politische Einstellungen, politische Participation und Waehlverhalten in Vereiningten Deutschland. Deutsche nationale Wahlstudie zur Bundestagswahl 1998*, Koeln, Zentralarchiv fuer Sozialforschung an der Universitaet zu Koeln [distributor], ZA 3066.

Table 3. The Changing Gap between the Position of the Electorate and that of the Party System in Germany, 1976-98.

Year	SPD	CDU	FDP	CSU	Party System	Electorate	GAP
1976	3.76	8.35	5.53	9.15	6.7	6.30	.40
1976	3.61	8.44	5.31	9.36	6.67	6.17	.50
1976	3.35	8.30	5.05	9.21	6.48	6.18	.30
1980	4.38	8.21	5.76	8.94	6.82	6.40	.43
1980	4.24	8.24	5.70	9.10	6.82	6.23	.59
1983	4.22	8.46	7.03	9.18	7.22	6.19	1.03
1983	4.05	8.55	7.03	9.31	7.23	6.17	1.06
1987	3.98	8.44	7.16	9.13	7.18	6.25	.93
1987	3.66	8.76	7.39	9.42	7.30	6.13	1.17
1987	3.64	8.65	7.26	9.41	7.23	6.16	1.07
1990	4.14	8.13	6.85	8.89	7.0	6.09	.91
1990	4.09	8.17	6.83	8.87	6.99	6.06	.93
1990	4.24	8.04	6.80	8.74	6.95	6.11	.84
1994						5.56	
1994						5.51	
1998	4.28	7.23	6.56	8.07	6.55	5.20	1.35
1998	4.11	7.42	6.66	8.24	6.62	5.30	1.32

Sources: The 1976 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer :0823 Titel: *Wahlstudie 1976* (Panel zur Bundestagswahl), Studie wurde durchgefuehrt von der Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim von: Manfred Berger, Wolfgang G. Gibowski Edelgard Grueber, Dieter Roth and Wolfgang Schulte in Zusammenarbeit mit Max Kaase, Hans D. Klingemann (Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen, Mannheim) und Uwe Schlecht (Universitaet Hidelberg); the 1980 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer : 1053 Titel: *Wahlstudie 1980*. Studien wurde durchgefuehrt von der Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim, Juni und September in Zusammenarbeit mit Dieter Fuchs (ZUMA, Mannheim), Hand Dieter Klingemann (FU, Berlin) und Uwe Schlecht (Universitaet Heidelberg); the 1983 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer: 1276 Titel: *Wahlstudie 1983* Primaerforscher: Manfred Berger, Wolfgang G. Gibowski, Dieter Roth, Wolfgang Schulte, Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim, max Kaase (Universitaet Mannheim), Hans Dieter Klingemann (FU, Berlin), Manfred Kuechler (ZUMA, Mannheim), Uwe Schlecht (Univeritaet Heidelberg); the 1987 are taken from ZA-Studiennummer: 1536 Title: (Trenduntersuchungen). Die Studien von Januar 86 zur Januar 87 wurden durchgefuehrt von Manfred Berger, Wolfgang G. Gibowski, Wolfgang Schulte (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim). Zusaetzlich fuer Februar 87 Institut fuer Praxisorientierte Sozialforschung e.V. Mannheim; The 1987 data are also taken from ZA-Studiennummer: 1537 Titel: *Wahlstudie 1987 (Panel Studie)*. Die Panel Studie wurde durchgefuehrt von Manfred Berger, Wolfgang G. Gibowski, Dieter Roth and Wolfgang Schulte von der Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim in Zusammenarbeit mit Max Kaase (Universitaet Mannheim), Hans Dieter Klingemann (FU, Berlin), Manfred Kuechler (Florida State University) and Frnz aUrban Pappi (Universitaet Kiel); the 1990 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer 1919 Titel: Primaerforscher: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. Mannheim in Zusammenarbeit mit Max Kaase (Universitaet Mannheim), Hans Dieter Klingemann (Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin), M. Kuechler (Hunter College, New York), Franz Urban Pappi (Universitaeten Kielund Mannheim) und H. A. Semetko (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor); the 1994 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer: 3065 Titel: *Politische Einstellungen, politische Participation und Waehlverhalten in Vereinigten Deutschland*.

Deutsche nationale Wahlstudie zur Bundestagswahl 1998, Juergen W. Falter (Universitaet Mainz), Oscar W. Gabriele (Universitaet Stuttgart) and Hans Rattinger (Universitaet Bamberg); the 1998 data are taken from ZA-Studiennummer: 3066 Titel: *Politische Einstellungen, politische Participation und Waehlverhalten in Vereinigten Deutschland. Deutsche nationale Wahlstudie zur Bundestagswahl 1998*, Juergen W. Falter (Universitaet Mainz), Oscar W. Gabriele (Universitaet Stuttgart) and Hans Rattinger (Universitaet Bamberg).